

PADA BEDA IN INDIAN CLASSICAL AND TRADITIONAL YOGA

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ABSTRACT

The phrase Pada Beda — derived from the Sanskrit roots pada (foot or step) and beda (distinction, differentiation, or division) — denotes a rich and ancient category of bodily knowledge that spans across the landscape of Indian classical arts and yoga traditions. While modern practitioners often associate yoga exclusively with stillness or seated postures, the tradition itself, as preserved in texts like the Natyashastra, Abhinayadarpana, Hathapradipika, and various Agamic scriptures, reveals an intricate grammar of foot movement, weight placement, and ground contact that is as precise as any notation system in the world.

This paper investigates Pada Beda as a cross-disciplinary concept — one that lives simultaneously in the world of dance, in the somatic experience of classical hatha yoga, in the energy-body understanding of Tantra, and in the ethical and devotional framework of Bhakti practice. Drawing on primary textual sources, oral pedagogical traditions, and contemporary scholarship, the study attempts to trace how the foot has been understood not merely as a physical appendage but as a site of cosmic meaning, energetic exchange, and spiritual aspiration.

The paper argues that Pada Beda is not a relic of performance theory alone, but a living body of knowledge that has much to offer present-day yoga practitioners, somatic therapists, movement educators, and scholars of Indian philosophy alike. Recovering this dimension of the tradition can help restore a depth of embodied awareness that has been partly lost in the global transmission of yoga.

KEYWORDS: Pada Beda, Yoga, Indian Classical Arts, Bharatanatyam, Prakriti, Sthana, Nritta, Padaprakaranam.

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INTRODUCTION: THE GROUND BENEATH THE PRACTICE

There is something profound about the image of a foot touching the earth. In the Vedic imagination, the earth — Prithvi — is not merely a surface to stand upon but a living presence, a mother, a witness. The Atharvaveda opens with a hymn to the earth that describes it as sustaining all living beings through its patience and its generosity. To place one's foot upon such a ground, then, is not a neutral act. It is a moment of relationship, of acknowledgment, perhaps even of gratitude.

It is within this philosophical context that one must understand Pada Beda — the science of foot differentiation as it exists within Indian classical and traditional yoga. The term itself is direct: pada means foot (though it also carries the meaning of a verse-quarter, a step, or a position), and beda comes from the root bhid, meaning to split, distinguish, or separate. Together, they denote a systematic classification of the ways in which the foot can be placed, turned, lifted, pressed, angled, or moved in space.

What may surprise many students of yoga today is the degree of attention Indian classical traditions have paid to this question. While contemporary global yoga culture tends to focus most intensely on the upper body — on the arms, the spine, the breath, the face — the classical texts from which yoga ultimately draws its lineage show an extraordinary attentiveness to the foot. The *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni, composed somewhere between 200 BCE and 200 CE, devotes entire chapters to the grammar of the feet. The *Abhinayadarpana* of Nandikesvara, a medieval digest of performance theory, lists fourteen principal foot positions (*caris*) and describes their emotional and aesthetic correspondences with remarkable precision.

Even within the yogic corpus proper — in texts like the *Gherandasamhita*, the *Shiva Samhita*, and the various tantric manuals that informed classical hatha yoga — the foot emerges as an instrument of energetic attunement. The way the weight is distributed through the sole of the foot during an *asana* shapes the energy channels (*nadis*) running through the legs. The angle of the heel affects the rotation of the femur. The spread of the toes influences the quality of rooting through the entire skeletal system. These are not merely anatomical observations; in the classical framework, they are descriptions of how *prana* moves through the body in relation to gravity and intentional positioning.

This paper sets out to examine *Pada Beda* from several angles. Section Two traces the textual history of the concept, situating it within the broader literature of *natya shastra* (performance theory) and *yoga shastra* (yoga theory). Section Three examines the specific categories and types of *pada beda* as described in classical sources, with attention to their terminology and their practical meaning. Section Four explores the philosophical and energetic dimensions of the concept within the yogic worldview. Section Five considers how *Pada Beda* knowledge has been transmitted through living lineages, and what challenges and opportunities face this transmission in the present moment. The concluding section reflects on the significance of recovering this dimension of the tradition for contemporary practitioners.

TEXTUAL HISTORY AND SOURCES

The *Natyashastra*: A Universe in the Body

The *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni is often described as the fifth Veda — a text so comprehensive in its treatment of the performing arts that it encompasses not only theater and dance but music, prosody, aesthetics, architecture, and cosmology. For the purposes of understanding *Pada Beda*, it is the chapters on *abhinaya* (expression), *nritta* (pure movement), and *cari* (foot movements in space) that are most relevant.

Bharata distinguishes between *bhumicaris* — movements performed at floor level — and *akasacaris* — movements that take the body into the air. Within the *bhumicaris*, the positioning and differentiation of the feet is governed by precise rules that relate to *rasa* (aesthetic emotion), *bhava* (feeling-states), and the narrative content being expressed. A foot turned outward conveys one kind of energy; a foot pressing inward suggests another. The weight on the heel means something different from the weight on the ball of the foot. These distinctions are not arbitrary: they arise from a deep attention to how physical positioning affects both the performer's inner state and the quality of energy transmitted to the observer.

The *Abhinayadarpana* and Its Elaborations

If the *Natyashastra* is the ocean, the *Abhinayadarpana* is one of its most accessible tributaries. Written in a terse, aphoristic style suited to memorization, Nandikesvara's text became the foundational manual for classical Bharatanatyam pedagogy in South India, where it continues to be studied and recited today. Its treatment of the feet is particularly meticulous.

The text describes the *sthanas* (standing positions), the *caris* (single-leg movements), and the *mandatas* (compound movements) that form the vocabulary of classical dance. Within each of these categories, the differentiation of the feet — their angle, their contact with the floor, their relationship to each other and to the center of gravity — is specified with great care. Notably, many of these positions appear also in the iconographic canon: the deities of the Hindu pantheon are depicted in precise bodily configurations whose feet positions carry specific devotional and cosmological significance.

Hatha Yoga Texts and Somatic Awareness

The hatha yoga texts of the medieval period — including the *Hathapradipika* of Svātmarama (c. 15th century), the *Gherandasamhita* (c. 17th century), and the *Shiva Samhita* (c. 17th–18th century) — approach the body from a different angle than the *natya shastras*. Their primary concern is with the cultivation of *prana*, the awakening of *kundalini* energy, and the stabilization of the mind through physical and breathing disciplines. Yet their descriptions of *asana* nonetheless contain implicit knowledge about *pada beda*.

When *Gherandasamhita* describes *Siddhasana*, it specifies the placement of the left heel at the perineum and the right heel above the left ankle, with the toes of both feet tucked into the spaces between the opposite thigh and calf. This is a precise instruction in foot positioning — one that determines not only the physical geometry of the posture but the energetic circuit it creates in the lower body. Similarly, when the texts describe *Padmasana*, *Virasana*, or *BaddhaKonasana*, the angle and placement of the feet are understood to influence the flow of *apana* — the downward-moving pranic force — and thereby the quality of meditative absorption the posture facilitates.

Agamic and Tantric Sources

The *Agamas* — the elaborate ritual and theological scriptures of Shaivism and Vaishnavism — contain extensive material on iconography, temple worship, and consecration rituals in which the feet of images and practitioners play significant roles. The act of touching the feet of a guru or a deity is itself understood as a form of energetic transmission. The guru's feet (*pada*) are regarded as sacred in the devotional traditions in ways that exceed mere social convention: they represent the meeting point between the transcendent and the earthly, between spiritual authority and embodied presence.

Within tantric ritual systems, the positioning of the feet during *sadhana* (practice) affects the activation of specific *chakras* and *nadis*. Some tantric manuals describe *mudras* of the feet — *pada mudras* — that are meant to seal energy within the body or direct it toward particular centers. These practices have received less scholarly attention than the hand *mudras* (*hasta mudras*) but represent an equally sophisticated dimension of the embodied tantric science.

CLASSIFICATION AND CATEGORIES OF PADA BEDA

Before examining specific categories, it is worth pausing to appreciate the epistemological stance that classical Indian thought brings to classification itself. In the Indian intellectual tradition, classification (*vibhaga* or *beda*) is not merely a taxonomic exercise but an act of discernment — a recognition of the inherent differentiation within reality itself. When Bharata enumerates the types of foot movements, he is not imposing an arbitrary grid upon something formless; he is, within his philosophical framework, revealing the structure already present in bodily experience.

Sthana: The Standing Positions

The foundational category in classical dance and yoga is sthana — the basic standing or seated configuration from which all movement originates. The *Natyashastra* describes six principal sthanas for men and five for women, each associated with different rasas and different types of dramatic character. Of particular importance for yoga practitioners is the Samapadasthana — the equal-footed stand — which corresponds roughly to Tadasana or Samasthiti in modern yoga. In this position, the feet are together, the weight is distributed equally, and the entire body is understood to be in a state of equipoise.

The Vaisakha sthana — feet spread wide apart, toes turned outward — creates a very different energetic situation: it opens the hips, grounds the body powerfully, and is associated with the vigorous, heroic (vira) mood. This corresponds to configurations found in Virabhadrasana and UtkataKonasana. The Mandala sthana, with knees bent and feet turned fully outward in a deep plie-like position, is the foundational stance of much classical Indian dance and appears in various temple carvings as the position of powerful protective deities.

Cari: Movement Pathways of the Single Foot

The cari system describes how the foot moves through space during dynamic sequences. The *Natyashastra* identifies thirty-two caris — sixteen performed on the ground and sixteen in the air. Each cari has a name derived from its quality of movement or the shape it traces: Atikranta (the passing step), Apakranta (the retreating step), Paryankita (the hip-swaying step), Sucividdha (the piercing needle movement).

Within yoga practice, cari-like sequences appear in vinyasa flows, in the step-by-step transitional movements between postures, and in walking meditation practices. The understanding of how the foot strikes the ground — whether heel-first, ball-first, or with a rolling motion — affects not only the joints but the entire energetic quality of the movement. A heavy, careless step dissipates energy; a precise, conscious step collects it.

Principal Pada Beda Categories

Table 1

Sanskrit Term	Description	Yogic / Aesthetic Application
Sama Pada	Feet together, weight equal on both soles	Tadasana; equipoise, balance, neutrality
Vaisakha Pada	Feet wide apart, toes externally rotated	Warrior stances; vigor, groundedness, heroism
Mandala Pada	Deep external rotation with bent knees	Devotional stances; earthy power, stability
Alidha Pada	Right foot forward, left foot back — warrior lunge	Virabhadrasana; courage, forward momentum
Pratyalidha Pada	Mirror of Alidha — left forward, right back	Countering postures; balance of dual energies
Sucividdha Pada	Needle-piercing; heel raised, toes press down	Rising energy; upward-moving prana
Ardha Pada	Half-foot — raised on the ball of the foot	Transition states; sensitivity, refinement
Udghatita Pada	Stamping foot — forceful contact with earth	Rhythmic grounding; release of excess vata
Agra Pada	Tip-toe; only toes touch the ground	Lightness, subtlety; upper-chakra attunement
Paryankita Pada	Foot swung laterally while body shifts weight	Dynamic flow sequences; hip and sacral opening

Pada Beda in Pranayama and Seated Practice

Within seated and meditative postures, the pada beda is expressed through the angle of the feet, the pressure distribution through the soles or insteps, and the degree of contact between foot and inner thigh or calf. In Padmasana, the feet rest sole-upward on the opposite thighs — a position that, according to tantric physiology, redirects prana from the earth through the body's interior rather than allowing it to flow outward. In Virasana, the tops of the feet press into the earth, which is associated with the cultivation of tapas (disciplined heat). In Baddha Konasana, the feet press together sole-to-

sole, which is understood as a mudra — a seal — that conserves reproductive energy and directs it upward through the central channel.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND ENERGETIC DIMENSIONS

The Foot as Microcosm

The Indian philosophical tradition has long understood the body as a microcosm of the universe — as a map, in miniature, of the cosmic order. This idea, developed in the Upanishads and elaborated through the centuries in Tantra, Ayurveda, and yoga philosophy, means that every part of the body carries a significance that extends beyond its biological function. The foot, as the part of the body that is most constantly in contact with the earth, bears a special relationship to the element of earth (prithvi) and to the muladhara chakra — the root energy center located at the base of the spine.

In the reflexology maps preserved in the Ayurvedic tradition, each region of the foot corresponds to a different organ or body system. While this knowledge is often presented in isolation today, divorced from its philosophical context, it originally formed part of an integrated understanding of the body in which the foot was a zone of deep diagnostic and therapeutic significance. The way one places and uses the feet in practice is thus not merely a matter of biomechanical efficiency; it is a way of communicating with and influencing the entire system of the organism.

Prana, Apana, and the Movement of Energy Through the Feet

Within the pranic model of the body, the feet are primarily associated with apana — the downward- and outward-moving dimension of prana that governs elimination, grounding, and the release of what is no longer needed. Excessive apana leads to heaviness, lethargy, and a sense of being stuck. Deficient apana — when energy cannot settle and ground — leads to anxiety, restlessness, and a feeling of being unmoored.

The different pada beda positions affect the apana principle in different ways. Poses that press the feet firmly and flatly into the earth — Sama Pada, Vaisakha Pada — are understood to stimulate apana and encourage grounding. Poses that lift the feet from the earth, or that allow contact through only a small point (Agra Pada, Ardha Pada), are understood to lighten the apana principle and cultivate the upward-moving energy of prana vayu. A sophisticated practice moves fluidly between these poles, calibrating the energetic quality of the body according to need.

Pada in Devotional and Ritual Contexts

In Hindu devotional practice, the feet of the divine are among the most sacred objects of contemplation. The lotus feet (pada kamala) of Vishnu, Shiva, or the goddess are the focus of an entire genre of devotional poetry — a genre that ranges from the Alvars of Tamil Bhakti to the poetry of Mirabai and Tukaram. The act of taking refuge at the feet of the divine — pada vandana — is a central gesture in Hindu prayer, just as it is in the guru-disciple relationship.

This devotional orientation toward the feet is not mere convention; it reflects the understanding that the feet represent the deity's most accessible and most compassionate aspect — the part of the transcendent that comes closest to the earth, to the ordinary, to the human. When a devotee prostrates and places their forehead at the feet of the divine or the guru, they are bringing the seat of their intellect (the forehead, associated with the ajna chakra) into contact with the most grounded and loving aspect of the source.

The Guru's Feet and the Transmission of Knowledge

The centrality of the guru's feet in Indian pedagogical tradition connects directly to the understanding of pada as a seat of power and grace. The term paduka — the guru's sandals — occupies a sacred position in many Indian spiritual communities: to receive and worship the guru's paduka is understood as a way of connecting to the entire lineage of teachers through whom the teaching has been transmitted across generations.

This is not, in the classical understanding, a form of personality worship. The guru's feet are venerated because they represent the point of contact between a human being who has realized the teaching and the ground of ordinary experience. The teaching comes through the feet — through the embodied, walked, lived practice — and not merely through intellectual instruction. Pada Beda, in this sense, is inseparable from the idea of knowledge that is transmitted through doing and through relationship rather than through reading alone.

LIVING TRADITIONS AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Bharatanatyam and the Preservation of Pada Beda Knowledge

Among the living traditions that have preserved the most elaborate and sophisticated treatment of Pada Beda, Bharatanatyam stands preeminent. The South Indian classical dance form — which underwent a significant revival in the twentieth century after a period of colonial suppression — retains in its training curriculum an extraordinarily detailed grammar of foot placement and movement. Students of Bharatanatyam spend the first years of training in large part on the development of araimandi — the half-sitting position with knees bent and feet turned outward — which is the foundational stance from which all footwork patterns (jati and nritta) are performed.

The training of the feet in Bharatanatyam develops not only physical strength and flexibility but a quality of rhythmic intelligence — the ability to respond instantaneously and precisely to complex patterns of time (tala) through the feet. The feet become, in this tradition, instruments of both time and space, marking the beat while simultaneously tracing pathways through the performance area. This dual function — temporal and spatial, rhythmic and navigational — reflects the classical understanding that the feet are not passive supports but active expressive organs.

Kalaripayattu and Martial Understanding

The ancient Kerala martial art of Kalaripayattu offers another window into the classical understanding of Pada Beda. In Kalaripayattu training, the development of foot intelligence — the ability to shift weight instantaneously, to adjust the angle and pressure of the foot in response to changing combat situations, to move across different types of ground with equal confidence — is considered foundational to all other skills.

The vadivu system of Kalaripayattu, which classifies fighting stances according to the animals they emulate (elephant, lion, horse, snake, cat, peacock, boar, and fish), assigns a specific foot positioning and weight distribution to each animal mode. The elephant vadivu uses a heavy, wide-footed, earth-pressing stance; the cat vadivu uses a light, ball-of-foot, spring-ready position. These are recognizable as variants of the pada beda categories described in the Natyashastra — a continuity that suggests a shared classical body of knowledge underlying both the martial and the performative traditions.

Modern Yoga and the Recovery of Pada Knowledge

The global transmission of yoga in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has brought many benefits — wider access to the practices, a flourishing of therapeutic applications, and a growing appreciation of the tradition's depth. It has also, in many streams, tended to emphasize certain aspects of the practice (alignment, breathwork, meditation) while leaving others relatively underdeveloped. The sophisticated classical understanding of Pada Beda is one area that has often been simplified or overlooked.

Many contemporary yoga teachers do attend carefully to the feet — instructing students to spread their toes, to press evenly through all four corners of the foot, to lift the inner arches, and so forth. This is valuable as far as it goes. But the classical framework of Pada Beda offers a much richer vocabulary and a much deeper understanding of what the feet can express and what they can open in the practitioner's experience. Introducing this vocabulary into contemporary yoga training — not as historical curiosity but as living practice — could significantly enrich the quality of attention that practitioners bring to their time on the mat.

Pada Beda and Somatic Therapy

Beyond the yoga studio, the classical understanding of Pada Beda has significant relevance for contemporary somatic therapy and movement education. The feet are among the most information-rich parts of the body: they contain more proprioceptive nerve endings per square centimeter than almost any other region of the body, and they are in constant dialogue with the nervous system as it negotiates balance, terrain, and postural organization.

Somatic approaches that have developed independently in the West — including the Feldenkrais Method, the Alexander Technique, and Continuum Movement — have arrived at many of the same insights about the foot that the classical Indian tradition encoded centuries ago. There is a genuine opportunity here for cross-cultural dialogue: the Indian classical framework provides a rich philosophical and aesthetic context for the somatic insights, while the modern somatic research offers scientific language and clinical applications that can help communicate the classical wisdom to new audiences.

CONCLUSION: THE WISDOM THAT WALKS THE EARTH

The investigation of Pada Beda in Indian classical and traditional yoga leads us, ultimately, to a recognition that is both simple and profound: the way we stand upon the earth matters. Not just biomechanically, not just aesthetically, but in the fullest sense — energetically, philosophically, devotionally, and relationally. The Indian classical tradition, across its many streams and expressions, has given centuries of attention to this question, developing a body of knowledge about the feet that is remarkable in its precision, its depth, and its practical applicability.

This knowledge is not lost — it lives in the muscles and memory of classical dancers, in the oral instructions of yoga lineages, in the carved feet of temple deities, in the devotional poetry of saints who longed to touch the lotus feet of the divine. But it is at risk of becoming increasingly peripheral in a global yoga culture that sometimes moves faster than it reflects, and that has not always paused to ask what remains in the tradition that has not yet been fully received.

The recovery of Pada Beda knowledge invites practitioners to bring the same quality of attention to the lowest and most ground-touching part of the body that they bring to the upper regions that command more obvious glamour. It asks us to take seriously the classical conviction that the earth is not merely a surface but a partner — a presence with whom we are always in dialogue, through the intermediary of our feet. And it suggests that this dialogue, when conducted with awareness and skill, is itself a form of practice: a way of walking that is, at every step, an expression of the whole person in their relationship to the whole world.

In the end, Pada Beda is about learning to meet the ground with intelligence and grace — and to let that meeting reshape everything above it. This is, in its quiet way, what yoga has always been about.

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